DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 114 EA 005 857

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TITLE School Food Program Crisis.
PUB DATE 25 Feb 74
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at American Association of School Administrators Annual Convention (106th, Atlantic City, New Jersey, February 22-26, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Breakfast Programs; Elementary Schools; Family Income; *Federal Laws; Food; Interagency Coordination; *Lunch Programs; Nutrition; Nutrition Instruction; *Program Costs; Secondary Schools; Speeches; *Student Participation
IDENTIFIERS *National School Lunch Program

ABSTRACT

As a result of increased subsidies and an amendment to raise family income eligibility, the number of children receiving free and reduced-price meals has increased. However, over 500,000 paying students--the financial backbone of the food programs--still are not taking advantage of the National School Lunch Program in participating schools. The nonparticipation of these students results from the fact that they are priced out of the program; their parents have not been informed of the liberation of the family income eligibility in the new legislation; States have given meager support for the school lunch food programs, both in financial and supervisory assistance; some of the food programs are unappetizing and provide too little food for high school students and too much for elementary school students; and there is little communication between USDA and the State departments of education. The school food programs will continue to be in trouble until there is a more equal partnership among the Federal, State, and local governments; the middle-income family can enjoy the benefits of the National School Lunch Program; and nutrition education is an integral part of the K-12 curriculum, according to the speakers. (Produced from best available copy.) (Author/MLF)

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
106th Annual Convention

Atlantic City, N. J. February 22-26, 1974

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TOPIC: SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAM CRISIS

TIME: 2:30 P. M. Monday, February 25, 1974

PLACE: Pennsylvania Room 1, Haddon Hall

PROGRAM: Page 472

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The crisis in the school food program can best be described by paraphrasing a currently popular song, "Where, Oh, Where, have all the children gone."

Figures released by the Department of Agriculture show that there were about a half million fewer children participating in the National School Lunch Program in October 1973 than in October 1972. At the hearings before the Senate Subcommittee on Nutrition and Human Needs in September 1973, it was reported that 300,000 children had dropped out, or been pushed out, of the National School Lunch Program primarily because of increasing food costs.

Since then, 250,000 have begun receiving free or reduced-price lunches as a result of the new family income eligibility levels provided for by the amendments to the National School Lunch Act, enacted last November as part of the emergency legislation to deal with the toll taken by rising food costs on the budgets of middle-income families.

All hell broke loose last September when the price of meals shot up because the cost of milk went up from 3 to 10 cents as a result of the administration's decision to limit the Special Milk Program to schools with no food programs. With rapidly rising costs for food and labor, schools threatened to reduce the number of free and reduced-price meals and even to shut down all food operations.

Organizations such as the U. S. Jaycees, National PTA, American Legion, and others such as school food service groups, pressed Congress to support increased reimbursements for school meals and to look into the operation of food programs in the schools. As a result of this pressure, hearings were held by the House General Subcommittee on Education of the Education and Labor Committee and the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. Congress responded by restoring the Special Milk Fund, making it available to all schools. Congress also increased the federal reimbursement rate for school lunches from 8 cents to 10 cents, and raised the subsidy for free and reduced-price lunches from 40 cents to 45 cents and from 30 cents to 35 cents, respectively. Reimbursements for breakfasts were set at 6 cents, and for a free breakfast at 20 cents and a reduced-price breakfast at 15 cents.

As a result of the increased subsidies, and the amendment to raise family income eligibility, the number of children receiving free and reduced-price meals has increased however, over 700,000 "paying" kids--the financial backbone of the food programs--still are not taking advantage of the National School Lunch Program in participating schools.

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Why? Do they continue to be priced out of the National School Lunch Program? Although most school districts reduced the price of milk after the Special Milk Program was restored, some have not. In addition, many schools have raised the price of their meals. Or, are school lunches so unattractive and unappetizing that students would rather bring a bag lunch? Is there substance to the charge that high school students don't get enough food on their plates and feel hungry after a meal while elementary school children throw away much of their food because the portions are too large?

Could it also be that there are still many among these 500,000 children who should now receive free or reduced price lunches because of the liberalization of the family income eligibility in the new legislation, but that their parents are not aware of their eligibility? Notwithstanding the fact that 250,000 more kids are getting free or reduced-price meals this year, there does appear to be less than a real effort on the part of schools to inform parents of the new eligibility standards if the results of a survey that we have taken have any merit. We believe they do, and at the very least, are quite revealing.

Our information shows that there has been little done since January to inform parents of the new rules. This is particularly true in suburban areas where we mistakenly assume that all families can make it despite the fact that many are struggling desperately to make ends meet during this period of runaway inflation.

Responses from school administrators included such phrases as "it hardly seemed worthwhile in the middle of the year . . . It's too much paper work." Others, in their own wisdom, determined that "we have no parents who would qualify" and "our parents would be embarrassed to apply for free or reduced-price lunches."

If we look at the school lunch program honestly, we find that there is no one who pays the full price for a school lunch or breakfast--all are subsidized to a greater or lesser extent. And, as we recognize the need to provide larger subsidies for increasing numbers of students, and that the cost of administering the support (the "paying" reduced-price, and free school lunch participants) is not free, is it not time for all of us to begin to consider seriously a free universal school food program. I submit to you that unless the hard-pressed middle-income parent finds some relief and benefit in the National School Lunch Program, the total program is in jeopardy, notwithstanding its purpose to safeguard the health and well being of the nation's children. These parents may decide, as the framers of the Home Education and Labor Committee did in the supplemental views attached to the Conference Report in 1969--the emergency Child Nutrition bill adopted in November--, that there is "no evidence at all that (to have children bring bag lunches) harms the children nutritionally."

Nor are parents alone in their criticism of the school food programs. In response to a request directed to school administrators to comment on how to improve food programs in schools, "get rid of them" was the blunt response on one return and others indicated that school boards had already made this decision chiefly because school lunch programs are not self-supporting special milk programs have also been done away with because schools were losing money.

From these responses, we also believe it is not unfair to conclude that a good many of us place a low value on the importance of nutrition for the wholesome development of children and youth, and their academic achievement in school. Let us illustrate further.

How else, for example, can we explain the meager support given by the states for the school lunch food programs, both in financial and supervisory assistance. State financial support for a school lunch ranges from a mill to 15 cents. Only in January 1973 was the first nutritionist hired by a state legislature as a legislative analyst. This was in California where in 1972 the governor vetoed a bill which would have

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provided $600,000 to help school districts meet 25 percent of the requirement to receive 75 percent federal funding for food services equipment.

What other school programs are required to pay their own way to such a degree? Yet we ask school food programs to be self-supporting.

Upon calling the hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Nutrition and Human Needs, Senator George McGovern, chairman, pointed out that there were 17,700 schools across the land, with a student population of 5,000,000, that do not participate in the National School Lunch Program. And, that over a million of the children attending these schools come from families below the poverty level entitled, under the law, to free and reduced-price meals. As we told the Subcommittee at the time, this was an appalling statistic and an equally appalling denial of the civil and human rights of these children and may ultimately deny them equal opportunity for employment and higher education.

Many schools do not participate in the National School Lunch Program because of what they consider the burden of administrative paper work; others cannot, or will not, assume some financial responsibility for the free and reduced-price meals, and still others are kept out of the program because of ineptness and/or unwillingness on the part of the state departments to help them qualify for equipment assistance which would make it possible to set up a program; others are victims of actions such as that of the governor of California. In fairness, too, it must be pointed out that neither the Department of Agriculture nor the administration has given strong support to this part of the federal food program. Although authorized to request $40 million for this fiscal year, the administration asked only for $6.1 million for equipment assistance.

We will conclude our comments about the apparent lack of appreciation for the school food program by calling to your attention the fact that nutrition education is not a required part of teacher training, nor an integral part of the school curriculum grades K-12. In-service training for school food personnel for the most part can best be described as sporadic and indifferent, and literally non-existent within the schools for parents--the other half of the team in a child's school life.

Nor can we blame students for being turned off by some of the food programs. How would you like a cold, even partly frozen hamburger? In addition, ridiculous things like not being allowed anything to put on a hamburger are reported by schools in Illinois. A pat of butter is provided in some schools, but no instrument with which to spread it. High school students complain that there isn't enough on their plates and elementary school children are sometimes overwhelmed by the quantity which, we are told, is the same for both. Students from minority groups are expected to eat and thrive on foods that are totally unfamiliar to them. Our survey shows us that where schools have dared to innovate, while at the same time meeting the nutritional requirements of the Type A lunch, participation is good. As Bob Dylan sings, the "times they are a'changing."

We view as part of the crisis in the school food programs the ironical fact that the legislation enacted last fall, which raised reimbursement rates for lunches and breakfasts, also eliminated the provision that gave additional support for schools classified as "Especially Needy" because of the high percentages of free and reduced-price meals served. Although spokesman in Congress say this was not their intent, nevertheless this is the way the Department of Agriculture interpreted the legislation. There has been a happy exception. Unexpectedly, according to

the regulations published by USDA on December 28, extra money will be available to schools serving a large number of free and reduced-price breakfasts. These schools are called "Especially Needy." Unfortunately, at the same time, breakfast programs are meeting resistance from state departments and teachers.

Elimination of the "Especially Needy" classification in the new legislation has caused hardships for many school districts where a large number of schools had been classified "Especially Needy" and may force states to provide less federal money to suburban schools in order to average out higher payments to "Especially Needy" schools. Equally disturbing are the results of a survey done last year by the U. S. Jaycees which revealed that in such cities as Gary, Indiana; Little Rock, Arkansas; Phoenix, Arizona; Dallas; Seattle; Des Moines, Iowa; and Lansing, Michigan food service directors said that they were totally unaware, or had little knowledge, of the "Especially Needy" status as provided for in PL 92-153, November 1971. Yet Des Moines and Lansing are state capitals, both have a number of schools with 75 percent receiving free and reduced-price meals, but were unaware and uninformed of the existence of the "Especially Needy" provisions.

Could this be still another illustration of the lack of support by various state departments? Should we conclude that there is little communication between USDA and the state departments of education?

Furthermore, criteria for declaring a school "Especially Needy" varied widely from region to region. In some regions a minimum of 75 percent meals served free or at a reduced-price qualified a school for the "Especially Needy" status; however, the Washington, D. C. schools were advised, as I understand it, that they had to serve 100 percent of the meals free or at a reduced rate to be able to declare their schools "Especially Needy."

Categorical funding of "Especially Needy" schools should be restored and the Department of Agriculture required to issue clear and concise guidelines which would be applied equally throughout the country.

Hailed as the answer to the annual financial crisis in the school food programs, and as a way to relieve Congress from making decisions each year as to the reimbursement rates, the escalator or cost-of-living clause added to the emergency legislation adopted in November appears to be working well. The semi-annual adjustments in the reimbursement rates, based on the cost of food away from home as listed in the Consumer Price Index published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the Department of Labor and increasing costs of labor, are now being processed. Reimbursements for each lunch served go from 10 cents to 10.5 cents on the national average. Comparable adjustments have been made for free and reduced-price lunches as well as the breakfast meals.

Nevertheless, the cost-of-living provision will not solve all of the financial problems or work miracles. There may even be some question as to whether the basic reimbursement rates can be kept at their present levels. In addition, certain costs, such as distribution and administrative, are not covered by the escalator clause and are passed on to the local districts.

The battle over commodities vs. cash payments heightens as local school foods personnel become increasingly disenchanted with the quality and quantity of commodities furnished by the Department of Agriculture. The new legislation provides that whenever USDA

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given out less than 90 percent of the commodities it originally programmed, it must make up the difference in cash. Many local school food directors would like to see commodity programs eliminated entirely as their problems with commodities and the Department of Agriculture mount.

Although USDA claims it will meet the goal of 90 percent commodity distribution this year, pointing to a new provision in the recently enacted Farm Bill which allows commodities to be purchased on the open market, surplus or no surplus, at the same time the Department is apparently considering cutting out commodity purchases that provide food for the school lunch program, according to an internal USDA memo released recently by Senator McGovern. The memo to Agriculture Secretary Earl L. Butz from Assistant Secretary Clayton Yeutter recommends "a gradual phase-down and hopefully phase out" of existing procurement and distribution programs" during the coming fiscal year.

The memo goes on to say that "Distribution to the schools should be reduced dramatically, and the shortfall replaced by cash, as is already permitted by law."

In the meantime, Senator McGovern has introduced legislation that would extend indefinitely USDA's authority to purchase food on the open market, regardless of whether they are surplus or not, to meet the Government's commitments under the National School Lunch Act and other existing laws.

Senator McGovern claims that the Yeutter proposals would work hardships upon school children and school budgets as government purchasing power allows the USDA to buy more food for the same dollar than a recipient organization could buy on its own.

Assistant Secretary Yeutter believes that his proposal would simply extend the cash-out provision in the present law to all cash in fiscal 1976. "Those days are gone," Yeutter said when the government did get large quantities of food at bargain rates because of ample surpluses. "We're not only not receiving bargain basement prices," said Yeutter, "sometimes we can't get bids for any price. While McGovern feels shortages won't last forever, Yeutter believes the present lack of surpluses is likely to prevail for some time.

Although Assistant Secretary Yeutter said in his memo, "The school feeding lobby is strongly opposed to termination of commodity procurement . . . because they wish to avoid transfer of the child nutrition program to HEW," to my knowledge the Big Six--American Association of School Administrators, Council of Chief State School Officers, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Education Association, National PTA, and the National School Boards Association--has not taken a position. It may, however, be necessary to do so. Reinforcing the Yeutter position is President Nixon's proposal to transfer food welfare programs to HEW.

Aside from the possible transfer of the food programs to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, President Nixon's proposals for child nutrition programs for fiscal 1975 are neither encouraging, nor particularly disturbing. While they do not expand programs, at least there are no recommendations to do away with the Special Milk program, for example. The president asked for $120 million for the Special Milk Fund; the $22.9 million increase is almost as much as the total the President sought for the whole program last year when the administration sought to limit the program to schools with no food programs.

The administration did request $1.247 billion for lunch, breakfast and other child nutrition programs. This is $486 million more than last year's $761 million appropriation. However, most of the additional funds are needed to meet new, higher federal reimbursement rates set by Congress last November.

What is the outlook for the 1974-75 school year? Certainly school food programs should get underway more smoothly than they did in September 1973. but the school food programs will continue to be in trouble until there is a more equal partnership among the federal, state and local governments; the middle-income family can enjoy the benefits of the National School Lunch Program and nutrition education is an integral part of the curriculum from K-12.

"Where, Oh, Where, have all the children gone?" Hopefully back to the nutritionally balanced and attractive meals of the National School Lunch Program.

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